

The proper balance of indian and american culture



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, the book of short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri, the protagonists are often in an unknown place. The reader can gain insight into the characters based on how they act during while in an uncomfortable situation. In the short story "Mrs. Sen", Mrs. Sen is unable to find the right balance between her Indian heritage and American culture, while the protagonist in "The Third and Final Continent" is successful in striking a good balance between the two cultures. In the short story "Mrs. Sen", Mrs. Sen holds onto her Indian heritage through her material Indian possessions. She did not want to leave India in the first place and cannot let go of her homeland. Throughout the story, Mrs. Sen expresses her love for the fish in Calcutta. While the fish from her local grocer is indeed fresh and reserved for her, she constantly remarks that the fish is not as fresh in America. For Mrs. Sen, the fish is not just food, rather, it's a piece of India. In her mind, India will always be superior to America. She did not choose her new country or its new fish. Moreover, Mrs. Sen displays her culture through her traditional cutting blade and her saris. She constantly is using the blade because it reminds her of gatherings with fellow Indian women. She holds on to these gatherings because in America, she is a prisoner in her own home, lacking social relationships. At the same time, her saris are symbolic of her Indian customs and she refuses to stop "wearing" them. Furthermore, the story ends with Mrs. Sen attempting to drive to the market to purchase the fish, but she crashes her car in the process. Her attempt to buy the fish is symbolic of her decision to finally "buy" into American culture. By ending the story with a crash, Lahiri shows that for some immigrants, assimilation is not possible. As a result, Mrs. Sen will remain miserable and uncomfortable in America. While living in unfamiliar America, Mrs. Sen proves that she will

not be able to achieve a balance between her original heritage and her new culture because she lacks the opportunities and drive to assimilate. In the short story “ The Third and Final Continent”, the protagonist demonstrates that assimilation to America is possible by eventually achieving a manageable balance between Indian and American Cultures. When he came to America, he purchased “ The Student Guide to North America” to read on the flight even though he was no longer a student. By reading the guide, the protagonist shows that he is willing to and plans to learn how to adapt to his new society. He successfully adapts due to his determination to make a good life for himself in America. Although the protagonist embraces American culture, he does not forget his Indian heritage. He preserves his Indian customs through food. He says, “ In the end I bought a small carton of milk and a box of cornflakes. That was my first meal in America. I ate at my desk. I preferred it to hamburgers or hotdogs... at the time I had yet to consume beef” (Lahiri 88). Although the protagonist does openly practice Hinduism, he still feels that he should not eat beef, because it is part of his heritage. The protagonist keeps the customs of his past culture because shared customs gives him a sense of unity with other Indians. By the end of the story, the protagonist recognizes how to keep a balance between his two cultures. “ We are American citizens now, so that we can collect social security when it is time. Though we visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow old today. I work in a small college library. We have a son that attends Harvard University. Mala now longer drapes her sari over her head...” (Lahiri 99). The balance translates into a more complete life for the protagonist and his family. Lahiri shows that assimilation was possible for the protagonist

because he had the desire and the opportunities to do so. Mrs. Sen fails to embrace American culture by only expressing her Indian side while the protagonist in "The Third and Final Continent" achieves a balance between both his cultures. Mrs. Sen's life is lonely and unhappy, while the protagonist of "The Third and Final Continent" eventually has a well-rounded life. Mrs. Sen originally had no intent on mixing the two cultures and partly because she is an Indian woman, she did not have as much exposure to allow her to assimilate to America. The protagonist of "The Third and Final Continent", on the other hand, is able to prove that with the right opportunities, assimilation is possible.